

THE DISC RECORDS OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY CHICAGO
AND THE COMPANIES WHICH SOLD THEM

by
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There is a monologue, oft recorded by Steve Porter, in which Flanagan, travelling in a streetcar, is thrown its whole length when the vehicle makes a sudden stop. Seeing Flanagan inspecting his person as he recovers himself, the motorman asks, "Have you missed anything?" To which the Irishman replies, "No, I think I hit everything on the way down!" I am rather like Flanagan in my efforts at historical research: I feel as if I must have bumped into everything by now, yet it is just as certain I am unaware of what is actually missing. In choosing a metaphor with which to open this piece, I have selected this one because it hints at self-depreciation. There can be no better way to approach as difficult and diffuse a subject as mine than with humility.

The disc records produced under the Standard, Harmony, United, Aretino, Busy Bee and other Chicago brands have always been a mystery to enthusiasts. Much has been conjectured about their origins. As often as not, I have heard that they were sold by Sears or by Montgomery Ward. This, at least, is on the right track, but I have heard a hundred other stories. To some it may be difficult to imagine how these records could be so intriguing. Yet, only a genuine mystery could engender so much hearsay and speculation. I shall take them one at a time and tell all that I know about them. This will not be the place to treat the talking machines produced by the companies I shall mention. That I have done elsewhere, and it is not now to the point.

THE STANDARD TALKING MACHINE COMPANY

Standard discs were sold by the Standard Talking Machine Company of Chicago. On October 11, 1901, this organization was begun as the East Liverpool China Company. Although its early life was devoted to the distribution of potteryware through advertising schemes, it began trading in talking machines under the "Standard" pseudonym around 1905. See Photograph #1. As had been the case with the china, Standard specialized in distributing inexpensive machines and records through department store promotions and other sales gimmicks. It continued, in one incarnation or another, right through the twenties, finally ending its days in 1932. To compensate for the small amount of profit Standard was making on the machines it sold, it, like the other firms treated here, sought to guarantee the sale of its records by equipping those machines in a special way. All Standard talking machines were made with an enlarged turntable spindle, of approximately 1/2" in diameter. Hence, only Standard discs, having a correspondingly swollen center hole could be played. These records were issued in 7" single-sided and 10" single and double-sided styles. So far as I have been able to discover, they were all pressed

from Columbia matrices or converted from the existing stock of that company by over-pasting labels. Indeed, Standard, operating with limited capital, seems to have "scavenged" as much as it "special ordered". See Photograph #2. Sometimes their label was clearly applied at the time of pressing, indicating a custom order, but other times it was glued on to disguise an ordinary Columbia record with its hole enlarged, suggesting that the latter company was dumping its unsold inventory. The fact that Standard catered to a mainly Midwestern, largely rural, clientele would seem consistent. Such a market would be a likely outlet for tunes that were a bit out-of-date. In fact, Standard discs, pasted up from old Columbias, are often found accompanying a talking machine which they pre-date by years.

Standard labels appear in a number of distinct types, with slight variations of same. Their "indigenous" label, or that which is found to have been applied when the record was pressed, was of shiny black paper with silver lettering. Columbia, it should be noted, was using the same color scheme on their labels at the time they began manufacturing Standard discs. The kind of labels used in over-pasting were of a slightly different grade of paper, some having "Standard Disc" in very large letters, some green, some black and white, some completely black with gold lettering. In cases where a single-sided record was converted, a rectangular patent notice was applied to the blank side of the disc covering up its Columbia counterpart. Of course, this identification was also affixed to "indigenous" recordings, where it did not hide a thing. It is curious to note that whereas Standard labels which were applied at the time of pressing are seldom found to have come unstuck, the pasted-on ones are quite often seen peeling back from the edges. It is clear that the latter was far from the most effective method of labelling discs, but it surely served for the contemporary life of the record.

Today, Standard discs are the most commonly seen of the Chicago brands. They were undoubtedly the leader in their field. The second most successful company, in terms to the evidence now extant, was an affiliated firm: the Great Northern Manufacturing Company, makers of the Harmony.

HARMONY RECORDS

To say that Standard was associated with Great Northern is something of an inversion. In truth, the East Liverpool China Company, a major arm of which was Standard, actually BECAME the Great Northern Manufacturing Company on April 24, 1907. Probably, the talking machine business had become so lucrative that the parent company decided to decrease its involvement with potteryware, and to branch out into the more promising area. Not only did they lose their nominal association with china at this time, but they introduced a new line of talking machines and discs called Harmony. These followed the pattern established by Standard in having an enlarged spindle orientation. In the case of Harmony, the dimension was approximately 3/4". The method of dissemination was the same.

Harmony goods, however, broke from the strictly Columbia mold, at least in appearance. This was true of the machines as well as the records. Though ordinary Columbia matrices were used, others were culled from the series of Star records sold by Hawthorne and Sheble of Philadelphia. These indefatigable sellers of talking machines and supplies managed a surprisingly long, though always dangerous, existence in the field. They were in and out of court for patent violations and huffer-mugger, and were only protected by some association with Columbia. In fact, the involvement of this last firm is apparent in the production of Star records, though they were made in such a way as to give no indication of this. Harmony used the Star matrix number as their catalogue number (as would O'Neill-James). These pressings appeared as 10" single-sided discs with a black and silver label, again suggesting Columbia. See Photograph #3.

In time, regular Columbia matrices were used exclusively, as they were by Standard. Similarly, both "indigenous" pressings and paste-overs were distributed. The parent corporation was seeking the most economical way of doing business. Harmony labels used on Columbia originals follow the same range of motifs as Standard. 10" single and double-faced discs are found thus decorated. It is unlikely that any 7" Harmony discs were issued. After all, the company entered upon the scene when the viability of such records had all but vanished. See Photograph #4.

In 1913 there was a major change in the corporation controlling Harmony (and Standard) products. Its name was officially altered from Great Northern to the Standard Talking Machine Company. It can only be assumed that the Harmony division, which had been given the appearance of further autonomy by being dubbed with another pseudonym, the Harmony Talking Machine Company, in 1911, was set adrift at this time. Indeed, though Harmony records and machines continued to circulate after this time, it is not known by whom. It seems likely that they were absorbed into a new enterprise.

UNITED TALKING MACHINE COMPANY

At the same time that the name Harmony Talking Machine Company was brought into use in 1911, the parent company saw fit to divide itself into a third distribution arm for machines and records: the United Talking Machine Company. Its name belying the circumstances of its birth, this firm traded in "Symphony" talking machines and United discs, which had a formidable spindle set-up of 1 1/2" in diameter. This was a precipitous moment in the industry. America was about to embark on a decade of complete domination of the talking machine by Victor and Columbia. United lasted only a few years. Like Harmony, it was jettisoned in 1913 when Great Northern died. If it continued, it did so as a shadow. Consequently, United records are seen less often in the present than Standard or Harmony. See Photographs #5 and #6.

United records were pressed from 10" double-sided Columbia masters. The labels were slight variations of an all-blue motif or black and white. This last marks those converted from other stock by pasting. Concluding

with this final member of the presently discussed group, I shall pass to a description of the records produced by its chief competitor.

THE O'NEILL-JAMES COMPANY

On April 22, 1904, Arthur J. O'Neill, travelling salesman and self-styled "advertising specialist", formed an association with Winifred B. James and Sherwin N. Bisbee to create the O'Neill-James Company (Inc.) of Chicago. Here was yet another small enterprise concentrating on the quick turn-over of cheap goods to promote sales, subscriptions or good will. Though this company also had an involvement with china and glass-ware, commonly used as premiums, within two years of its incorporation it was listing talking machines as its principal trade. In a curious and cunning play-on-words, the treasurer of the firm, Mr. Bisbee, lent his name to the new line of machines and records: Busy Bee. Although cylinder phonographs and records were distributed by O'Neill-James under the Busy Bee brand, I shall here concern myself only with the discs of the same name. See Photograph #7.

O'Neill was a clever man with a clear vision directed at the talking machine. Eventually, he was to be granted a patent regarding disc records. His method of enforcing the sale of his own discs was to give his talking machines a "normal" 1/4" spindle, but to affix to the turntable a metal nub or protrusion which would fall in the space on the record between the end of the playing surface and the edge of the label. Of course, Busy Bee brand discs had a supplementary hole cut in the proper place to accept this nub, but they were the only records it was possible to play on such a machine. Although this situation is identical to that brought about by the enlarged spindles of the Standard-Harmony-United group, Busy Bee records had the added advantage of being quite playable on Victor, Columbia or Zonophone machines, where the extra orifice had no effect upon performance. In fact, the legal "notice" found affixed to the back of many single-sided Busy Bee records mentions their use as replacements for the worn out discs of those very companies as being principal to the agreement under which they were licensed. See Photograph #8.

Busy Bee discs had an extremely colorful label, featuring a bee hive with its occupants emanating from the center hole. They were made from the masters of a number of different companies. Although Columbia provided O'Neill-James with certain of the talking machines they sold, Busy Bee records were pressed from the matrices of American, Star, Leeds-Catlin and Zonophone. All appear to have been original pressings using the Chicago label, not conversions from old stock. They are found in 7" single-sided, 10" single and double-sided and even in 10 1/2" single-sided sizes. The latter was taken from American masters, although the 10" and 7" single-sided pressings of that company were also used. American records were the result of an alliance between Hawthorne and Sheble and the international talking machine entrepreneur F. M. Prescott. Whereas American records sold under their own label were made of an eye-catching blue shellac, the company apparently reserved the privilege of this distinction since the discs it sold to O'Neill-James were of an

ordinary black color. As mentioned, 10" single-sided Stars and Zonophones were also employed. From Leeds-Catlin were drawn 10" and 7" single-sided issues, and, in addition, a 10" double-sided series which appears to have been quite limited. As can be expected, the physical appearance of Busy Bee discs varied a great deal. Not only was there a range of sizes, but the thickness, shape of the rim and location of the matrix information used by the original companies were often quite different. It should be noted that at least on one occasion O'Neill-James is known to have produced a recording using its own equipment. Upon a visit of politician and rhetorician William Jennings Bryan to Chicago, the famous man's words were recorded "live" as he addressed a crowd and issued on a special Busy Bee disc.

It is likely that the O'Neill-James Company laid in a great stock of Busy Bee records in the hopes that business would be so brisk as to soon exhaust the supply. From the evidence I have found, however, this was not the case. After the independent record companies from which it had purchased its inventory had been driven out of business by Victor or Columbia, O'Neill-James continued to distribute badly out-of-date discs with their machines. The fact that so few double-faced releases are found is an indication of this. As early as 1909 the company had taken to listing other items as its principal source of revenue, and, though it was to survive until 1914 before being superseded by the Arthur J. O'Neill Company, its disposition turned to the liquidation of existing stock. There was another reason, too, for the change in the activity of the O'Neill-James Company. The talking machine interest had shifted to a related firm: the Aretino Company.

THE ARETINO COMPANY

As previously noted, Arthur J. O'Neill was granted a patent. With its granting on December 31, 1907 (874,985), it is likely that O'Neill held high hopes for his future involvement with the talking machine. Six months earlier he had formed a new enterprise based upon the very premise of his patent. On June 3, 1907 he had started the Aretino Company (Inc.). It may shed some light on the unique nature of this man's genius to recall that Aretino was the name of a Renaissance Italian satirist and pornographer. Surely, there is implicit humor in this choice, especially since others likely would be drawn to such banalities as "Apex", "Acme", "Deluxe"...even "Victor" or "Columbia". See Photograph #9.

The specifics of O'Neill's patent relate to a "ring-shaped" disc record - one with a hole so large it would go beyond what had been attempted by the Standard-Harmony-United group. By producing a record with the greatest-of-all center holes, there can be no doubt that O'Neill intended it to be playable on ANY talking machine, even those of his Great Northern competitors, through the use of adapter rings. With such in mind, he designed his Aretino discs with a center hole of 3" in diameter and equipped his machines to match. With his dream of a "universal" record at hand, it is understandable why O'Neill shifted his emphasis

away from the O'Neill-James Company, though his two firms were to be "consolidated" after 1910. Following that date, and even after it had lost its identity as a separate company, Aretino continued to operate with the greater prominence of the two. See Photograph #10.

Aretino discs can be a problem for the scholar, since the size of the hole is sufficient to remove important matrix information in some cases. It is even difficult, if not impossible, to tell if they were given the Aretino label at the plant or converted from other brands by over-pasting. Because so much of the record is lost to the hole, it is possible for Aretinos to have been created out of ANY other brand of disc, EVEN BUSY BEE. Yet, Aretino records may be divided into two series, with the probability of a few variations. The series with catalogue numbers prefixed by "A" were pressed from single-sided 10" Leeds-Catlin matrices. The catalogue prefix "D" denotes double-sided records most commonly made from Columbia masters, though Leeds-Catlin is sometimes found represented here. Unique to the Chicago brands, a 12" single-sided series were also drawn from Columbia.

Aretino discs and "hornless graphophones" were still being vigorously promoted in 1913. Yet, the next year this activity was interrupted at the same time as the demise of the O'Neill-James Company. If any activity continued under this company's successor, that is Arthur J. O'Neill himself, it must have been limited.

ANOMALIES

The number of deviations from the most common forms of these Chicago brands is so great, and the variations so unpredictable that it would not be possible to catalogue them here. However, it is reasonable to discuss a few.

Within the Great Northern group the association of the companies was so close that the separate identities of the records occasionally blurred. For this reason a United record may be found with a hole the size of a Harmony disc. Other instances of one of these records with the "wrong" sized hole have been reported too. People sometimes mistake the "Harmony" brand from the 20s, with its "normal" sized hole, for a variation of the Great Northern brand. There was, however, no connection between the two.

"Diamond" brand records were sold at the same time as the other Chicago discs, and can be found with 1/2", 3/4" and 1 1/2" holes. All these seem to be paste-ups from Columbia stock. Diamond also marketed a Columbia type "AU" talking machine with a Chicago label on it. The machine in this case was equipped with a 1/2" turntable spindle, like a Standard. This peripheral brand may have had some association with the Great Northern companies, or it may have been about to catch an occasional sale from the owners of the machines sold by those firms. See Photograph #11.

The Consolidated Talking Machine Company (Inc.) was started in

January of 1916 in Chicago. Of the \$15,000.00 in capital stock with which it was inaugurated only \$900.00 was actually paid in cash. The remainder was accepted as the following:

Talking machines, records, accessories and office fixtures	\$ 6,800.00
Outstanding accounts	4,300.00
Cash on deposit	1,000.00
Good will	<u>2,000.00</u>
Total	\$14,100.00

From this we may assume that this company was being created from an already existing firm. What brand of merchandise actually changed hands? It is interesting to speculate that it might have been part of the assets of Harmony or United. These might have been purchased after Great Northern dissolved in 1913. Certainly, the connection is there, since Consolidated, under its own label, distributed discs with center holes suitable to be played upon the machines of the Standard-Harmony-United group.

Consolidated lasted through the 20s, filing its last report in 1930. It is likely that it pursued what business there was left in the odd-sized hole market until it became a victim of the Depression. See Photograph #11.

The Royal Talking Machine Company (Inc.) for formed in 1918 in Chicago. This company sold Columbia-made disc machines of a style considerably out-moded for their late entry upon the scene. Sometimes these machines had a 1/2" spindle, like a Standard, other times they had a regular 1/4" spindle. Although I have never seen discs of any kind bearing a Royal label, this firm was at least peripherally involved in the odd-sized hole market.

"D and R" records were sold by the D and R Record Company of Chicago. The letters in the name stood for "double and reversible". Obviously, the major selling point of this company is contained in its title. The records they sold, decorated with their own blue label, were taken from Columbias. Although this firm used the regular 1/4" spindle hole, it is mentioned here because at least one Standard disc has been found to be a paste-over of a D and R. It appears that the Chicago companies had a certain amount of truck with one another. See Photographs #12 and #13.

Lastly, I wish to enter a note about announcements. Not all manufacturers of records used a title announcement before the start of the selection, and those that did often varied its content. Although all of the companies which supplied the Chicago brands used some kind of announcement during their operating lives, they as often as not omitted the name

of the company. This proved useful to the firms which purchased records from them to sell under other brands, and perhaps it was done for that reason. It seems impossible, however, that the Chicago discs could have avoided an occasional "slip of the announcement" when the original company's name was spoken. This is quite true, and I have heard a Busy Bee disc clearly announced, "American Record."

Here ends my discourse on the Chicago brands of record. Like Flanagan, searching around for his watch after he has gotten off the street-car, I shall doubtless discover what is missing as soon as I have left this page.



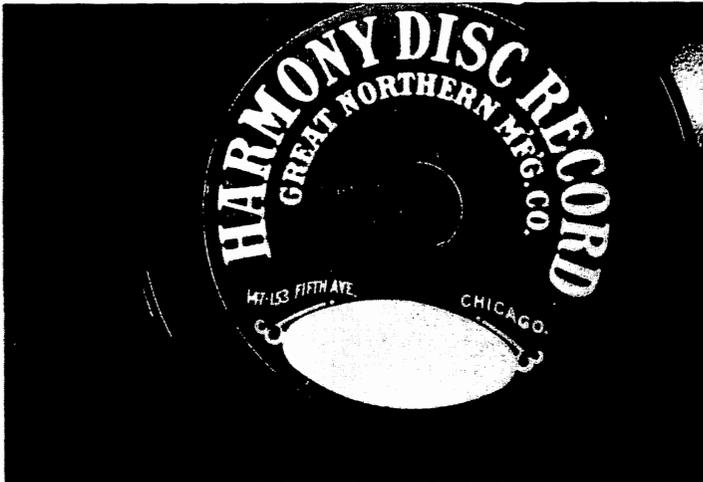
#1
 Typical "Black and Silver" Standard. Note the glued-on copyright stamp which added a few cents to cover royalties.



#2
 An Over-pasted Standard Label. The title information on these was put on with a rubber stamp - suggesting they were made up as availability determined.



#3
"Black and Silver" style Harmony label.



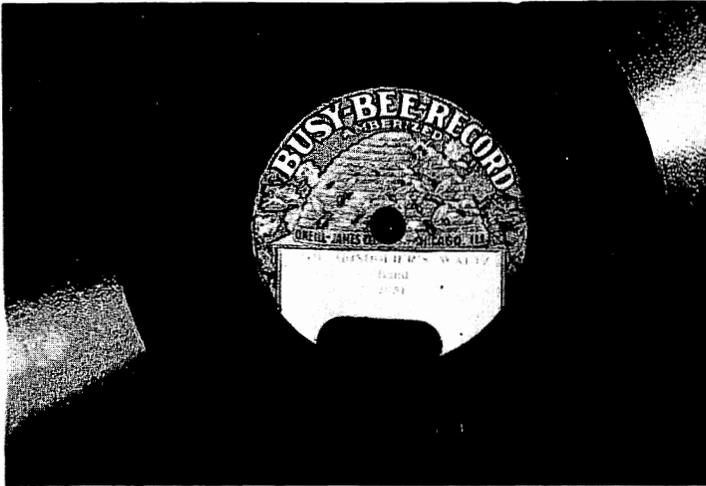
#4
This type label is one of those found on Harmony records where there is another brand of label underneath.



#5
Very pretty blue United label.



#6
This unusual United has been given a hole to fit a Harmony machine.



#7

Single-sided Busy Bee label - note the epithet "Amberized", the root of which would be reflected in the naming of Edison's Amberol records.



#8

Label of double-sided Busy Bee has patent information printed in an arc above the name.



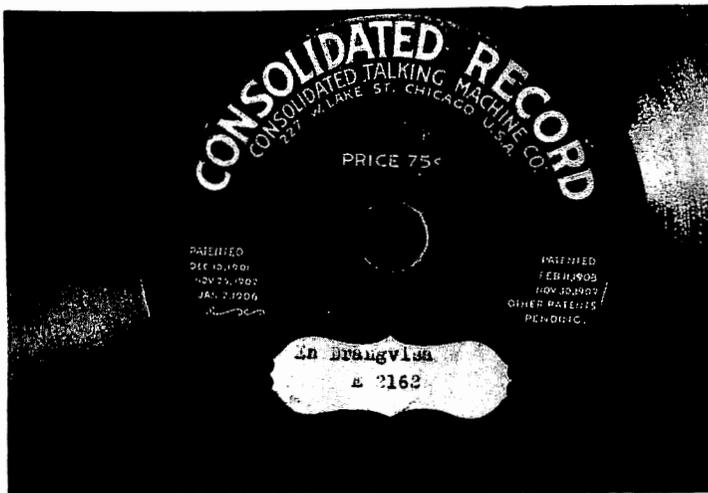
#9

An Aretino label. As is sometimes the case, the title has been a victim of the size of the hole.



#10

A Diamond record - typical of this over-pasted variety. This one is cut to fit a United machine.



#11

A Consolidated record - this time meant for a Standard type machine.



#12

A Standard disc with a green over-pasted label is seen to have another label beneath.



Upon removing the Standard label with water, the record is found to have been a "D and R". Usually Columbia labels are discovered in this way.